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ABSTRACT

Many students consider the writing of papers to be a lonely, difficult, and even painful process. To enable these students to improve their essays and research papers, a teacher has used a collaborative method of writing called the group paper. This method encompasses the various stages of writing, from freewriting of first drafts through multiple revisions. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are integrated during the process. Such active participation provides an opportunity for students to enhance their learning skills and gain social acceptance, integration, and friendships. (MG)

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MISERY NEEDS COMPANY: THE GROUP PAPER

Dr. Marlene M. Pomper

To enable both developmental and average students to improve their essays and research papers, I have developed a collaborative method of writing that I call the group paper. In presenting this integrated approach to reading and writing, I will consider four general subjects: (1) the origins of the idea; (2) the reasons for the project; (3) methods used; (4) the evaluation of this project.

The Origin

While a participant in a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute, I discovered the value of group discussion, argumentation, brainstorming and all other forms of prewriting and organizing of ideas. Participants jointly determined general goals, shared and evaluated ideas for possible curricular innovations and greatly benefitted from the early feedback we received. The momentum gained and the lessons learned from such teamwork I believe to be of such value that they need to be shared with students.

My Findings

While applying this group process to my students' writing, I quickly discovered that it: (1) increases their learning skills; (2) helps them to understand the

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processes involved in research; (3) encourages active participation; (4) provides an opportunity for social acceptance, integration, and friendships.

Advanced Preparation

Before starting these projects, students must know how to find the main idea when reading and writing, to summarize, paraphrase, outline, preview, skim and scan, to understand the author's purpose, to use the dictionary, card catalog, periodic listings, encylopedias, and published bibliographies, to provide evidence and cite sources.

Procedures for the Research Paper

I have already employed several different means of writing such papers. For the research paper, I use the following procedure:

1. The class divides according to its views on an issue. One large topic is divided into two. Each group of approximately five students assumes either the pro or con side of each of two issues.

2. Students, with the aid of a research person selected from each group, organize readings and select a controversial issue for discussion.

3. Students select a recorder from each group to record student responses.

4. They choose a group leader to organize and summarize discussions.

5. They rewrite the results of these sessions as a group paper, with copies for each student and instructor.

6. Students revise and edit papers to suit their needs and incorporate the results in a final draft.

7. They present these materials as term papers of approximately ten pages total or two pages apiece.

8. Students then write a critical analysis of the opposing results as a comparative and contrast essay.

9. They read numbered, but anonymous, comparison and contrast papers and submit grades on a separate, unsigned piece of paper. The instructor's and combined students' grades are recorded, as well as a student's self-evaluation.

10. To insure active and intelligent participation by all group members, students summarize their own progress during a 10 minute weekly class session.

11. This project is completed within three weeks. Students consult with their instructor should they experience difficulties. Reference librarians provide additional assistance, as they are kept informed of this project.

Some topics students have chosen for this projects are the pros and cons of the following: automation at work or home; living together before marriage or capital punishment.

Here is a simplified version of this paper suitable for most courses. It requires about three class periods.

The Group Essay

1. Students read a cluster of essays presenting different views of the same theme or a single short story.

2. They then develop varied theses statements from their reading suitable to essays of about seven paragraphs.

3. The class (of about 20-25 students) selects a total of four or five theses statements. Students select one of these and work with their corresponding group.

4. Each group decides on 4-5 topic sentences for that thesis. Each student writes a paragraph for that sentence, including in it some statistics, some quotations from interviews or reading, an anecdote or very specific examples to back the thesis.

5. Groups merge their essays, either by computer, or by cutting and pasting paragraphs. Then they write a joint introduction, conclusion, and transitions.

6. Groups revise and edit individual first drafts, after which they pool suggestions on one copy that is submitted as a second draft.

7. Instructors read, grade, and provide group comments on students' second drafts. Students copy instructors' comments, corrections, and group grade onto individual copies for study.

The Ideas and Implications

- It is important to stress the process rather than the product in student writing.

- Students need to link writing with speaking, listening, reading to communicate ideas/ emotion.

- They need to incorporate some freewriting into their their work devoid of teacher criticism. One way is to have students write evaluations of the project.

- Instructors need to emphasize the phases of writing as prewriting, writing and revision. If computers are unavailable, they may provide scissors, tape and staples as aids in revision.

Some essays resulted from a reading and interpretation of Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp." One object of the assignment is to show students that a single work can have a number of interpretations. Students later enjoy hearing all groups read their final drafts aloud.

As a consequence of this project, students see the value in sharing their knowledge. They also learn to accept criticism as a group experience. Together, they experience the joy of discovery and a creativity that comes from the synthesis of ideas. Their motivation stems from working on topics of their choice, from becoming independent of their instructor, and from peer group cooperation and intramural type competition. Minority group members and bilingual speakers find such activities particularly useful, as they often feel hampered by both a lack of familiarity with research techniques and by the demands of standard written English.